INTERNATIONAL RAINY LAKE BOARD OF CONTROL
IRLBC

NEWS RELEASE

June 7, 2001

HIGH LEVELS ON NAMAKAN AND RAINY LAKES AND ON THE RAINY RIVER

As of June 7, all inflows in the Rainy River basin are declining and no significant rainfall is expected for the next week. The level of Namakan Lake peaked on May 30 and is now declining, and Rainy Lake appears to have now reached its peak. However, levels and flows will continue to be high for the next few weeks and, until significant drying has taken place, the basin will continue to be vulnerable to rising conditions again if significant rainfall occurs. Also, while a high water event such as experienced this spring is relatively rare, with levels at most sites typically not seen since 1968, it is noted that higher levels have occurred in the past and will likely occur again at some point in the future. Property owners must plan their developments to accommodate such events. A summary of this spring's event to date is given below.

This spring the Rainy River Basin has experienced very high water levels and flows. This event has been driven by extreme amounts of rainfall in April and May. In April the Rainy-Namakan basin received 117 mm (4.6 in) of rainfall, which is nearly three times the median amount of 40 mm (1.6 in). By the end of May the April-May rainfall had totalled 240 mm (9.4 in), which is nearly 2.5 times the median amount of 102 mm (4 in) for this period and equalled the maximum recorded since 1948.

In response to this rainfall, Namakan Lake inflows rose from 50 m^3/s (1770 ft^3/s, a 1 in 10 year low value) in early April to 325 m^3/s (11480 ft^3/s) by April 15 (maximum of record for that date) and eventually peaked near 800 m^3/s (2625 ft^3/s) in late May. As a result, the lake level rose sharply. From its initial level in early April at the three-quarter point within the operating band defined by the International Joint Commission (IJC), it reached the upper rule curve of this band by April 30 and continued rising, peaking at elevation 341.45 m (1120.24 ft) on May 30. This level was the highest seen on the lake since 1968 and was 50 cm (19.7 in) above the highest point on the IJC upper rule curve. Abitibi-Consolidated and Boise Cascade responded to the increasing inflows, pulling the first stop-logs from the dams on April 9. All sluices were flowing by April 17, and the dams were fully open by May 2. However, the inflows significantly exceeded the outflow capacity of the dams until late May, and so the lake level rose. As of June 7, the lake level has declined to 341.32 m (1119.82 ft), 13 cm (5.1 in) below its peak level, and inflows to the lake, although still very high and the maximum of record for this time of year, are declining.

Rainy Lake inflows also rose very quickly in response to the rainfall. From only 107 m^3/s (3780 ft^3/s, a 1 in 20 year low value) in early April, they reached near 700 m^3/s (24720 ft^3/s) by mid-April (maximum of record for that date) and 1380 m^3/s (48730 ft^3/s) by late May. Again, the companies responded by increasing the outflow from the lake. Thirteen of the 15 gates were open by April 24, but 2 gates had to be subsequently closed because of low forebay levels just upstream of the dam. Due to restrictions in the river channel near Pither's Point and elsewhere, the upper river cannot deliver to the dam all of the water that the dam could release until the lake is at higher levels. The companies continued to open gates, as possible, and all were open by May 16. Nevertheless, with inflows rising quickly and soon exceeding the amount of water that could be released through the dam, the lake level rose. From its initial level in early April, just below the mid-point of its IJC operating band, the lake reached its upper rule curve by April 16 and kept rising. As of June 7, it appears that the level of Rainy Lake has now peaked, at 338.23 m (1109.68 ft). This is the highest level reached since 1968. Inflows are still very high at about 1090 m^3/s (38490 ft^3/s, greater than a 1 in 20 year inflow for this time of year), but have declined from the peak in late May.

Water levels and flows along the Rainy River have been impacted not only by the very high outflow from Rainy Lake, but also by the high flows from local tributaries. The maximum flow recorded this year to date in the Rainy River at Manitou Rapids was 1693 m^3/s (59790 ft^3/s) on May 25. The combined flow of the Big and Little Fork Rivers peaked on April 14 at 731 m^3/s (25810 ft^3/s) , but rose again to 571 m^3/s (20160 ft^3/s) on May 25 in response to another period of heavy rain. As a result of these high flows, the Rainy River rose to levels not seen since 1974, with the level below the Fort Frances - International Falls dam peaking at 332.05 m (1089.40 ft) on May 25.

The International Rainy Lake Board of Control is aware that some concerns are being expressed by basin residents regarding the regulation of the lakes during this high water event. At the request of the International Joint Commission, the Board will be preparing a report on the causes and handling of the event, and all concerns raised will be thoroughly addressed. The IJC has advised that the report will be made public.

The Board recommends that property owners and users of the system continue to keep themselves updated on basin conditions for at least the next few weeks. Up-to-date information can be found on Boise's web site (lakes.bc.com), on the Lake of the Woods Control Board site (www.lwcb.ca) and on the St. Paul District Corps of Engineers web site (www.mvp-wc.usace.army.mil). Persons can also call the Board's engineering advisors, Rick Walden (819-997-2529) or Ed Eaton (651-290-5617).

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FURTHER INFORMATION:

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The media are invited to include with their stories graphs of the levels, inflows and outflows of Rainy and Namakan lakes. These graphs can be found at www.lwcb.ca/waterflowdata.html.